



Aesthetic Labour in Police Administration Department of Pakistan:
Navigating Institutional Pressures in Islamabad and Rawalpindi

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Abstract

Aesthetic Labour, which involves the use of workers' embodied abilities, such as their physical appearance, grooming, behavior, and voice, has received much attention in the Western, private sector, and service-based industries. However, the implementation of this concept in uniformed, state, and Global South institutions remains to be explored. This research focuses on the various ways that Police Officers from the Islamabad Capital Territory Police and the Rawalpindi Police articulate, confront, and cope with the pressure to comply with aesthetic labour demands. It has a qualitative approach and uses 45 semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion (n = 50). Reflexive Thematic Analysis used to analyze the data within the interpretivist research paradigm. Five overarching themes emerged from the data: aesthetic compliance and demands of the uniform; colorism and hierarchies of skin tone; navigation of the sifarish (patronage network); gender and the sense of belonging within institutions; and the emotional and psychological toll. The research shows that the demands of aesthetics within the context of policing in Pakistan are the result of the convergence of patriarchal organizational cultures, colorist informal hierarchies, and patronage-based career mobility. Female officers face a greater burden of aesthetic and identity demands. This research extends the theory of aesthetic labor in the public sector, offering both empirical and theoretical contributions, to uniformed services in similar South Asian institutional contexts.

Keywords: Aesthetic labour, Pakistan Police, colorism, sifarish, gender, institutional patriarchy, reflexive thematic analysis, Global South

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Introduction

Warhurst and Nickson (2001) provide the earliest definition of aesthetic labour and describe the different ways organizations deploy their employees' capabilities based on their physical, visual, and self-articulated features, and how, in turn, these characteristics are used to fulfil the organizations' goals. Although the original definition of aesthetic labour was concerned with certain types of service employment in the UK, there are now many more ways to apply the concept. For example, Wood (2024) showed how the distinction between aesthetic, affective, and emotional labour becomes less clear in many cases of aesthetic management. Schinoff et al. (2024) conducted a review of more than 200 research articles and documented the various ways in which organizations and institutions work on the human body. The study showed that there are many body management practices in different types of organizations (beyond those that offer services) which control and commodify human bodies.

Pakistan is interesting for studying aesthetic labor for different reasons. Pakistan ranks 145th of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum 2024). This measurement reflects heavily patriarchal structures, caste and class systems, along with policing from the colonial era that still employs the British colonial system of physical body norm measurement. Women represent under 3% of police employees (the lowest in comparable South Asian countries). They experience aesthetic pressures and identity, and gender-based pressures, in what is considered a masculine environment (Asian Lite Report 2026). The National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan (2024) reported that women in state formal and informal institutional services, including policing, are still experiencing gender-based pressure in patriarchal systemic organizations. These are systems that demand women adhere to a specific organizational normative structure and presentation.

Sifarish means an advancement from a network of patrons, entrenched in culture and system, which facilitates recommendation. It helps in the understanding of the workings of aesthetic labour in Pakistan Police as part of policing (Ahmad, 2022). Aesthetic performance is one of the factors that facilitate entry into these informal networks. This is, therefore, one of the factors that create the disadvantage for the officers in terms of hegemonic institutional norms. Colorism is the preference for lighter skin tones and presents an additional aesthetic level of stratification that Sissoko et al. (2024) contend, in the South Asian context, is a microaggression. Adjacent South Asian service settings have been referenced as having a dark-is-hardworking tendency, (Ghoshal & Gill, 2025). This further complicates the model, suggesting that in the South Asian context, the aesthetic hierarchies cannot be simplified to privilege model based on skin tones.

Although there has been an increase in research focused on gender in Pakistani policing (Malik et al., 2025; Ahmad, 2022; Academia International Journal, 2025) and in affective or aesthetic labour in institutions (Giazitzoglu, 2025; Wood, 2024), there are currently no studies available that delve into examining aesthetic labour in the Pakistan Police. This is the aim of the study. The research also aims to investigate the ways in which officers in the Islamabad Capital Police and the Rawalpindi Police, who are in the two geographically adjacent and institutionally significant police services of the twin cities, articulate and cope with aesthetic labour, demands which are generated and reinforced by the institutions. The research will span rank, complexion, and gender.

The aim of this study is to answer three broad research questions. First, how are aesthetic labour demands discerned through formal and informal means in the Islamabad and Rawalpindi Police departments? Second, how do aesthetic labour experiences of Officers get mediated through gender and color discrimination and by Sifarish? Third, what are the

psychological and emotional effects of aesthetic labour compliance on Officers, and how do these effects vary by gender? The following sections detail the methodology, findings, and discussion, and the contributions of the study to aesthetic labour theory.

Literature Review

Aesthetic Labour: Conceptual Foundations

The concept of aesthetic labour was developed by Warhurst and Nickson (2001) to explain how organisations use the embodied labour potentials of employees such as physical appearance, style and type of speech as productive labour within the workplace. In contrast to emotional labour where the emphasis is put on emotional regulation (Hochschild, 1983), aesthetic labour is related to the regulation of body and the superficiality of self. This theoretical framework has remained a source of academic discussion; Wood (2024) broadened the conceptual field of aesthetic labour by exploring the intersection of feminine beauty and body work with the affective aspect showing that the surfaces between the aesthetic and affective labour are more permeable than previous formulations indicated. The core dimensions that were found in the original framework — namely physical attractiveness, fashion and dress, manner and deportment, and voice and linguistic presentation — are analytically relevant; however, scholars have grown to believe that the functioning of these dimensions cannot be decoupled from the gendered, racialized and institutional contexts in which workers are situated (Giazitzoglu, 2025).

Theoretical Development and Organizational Context

Aesthetic labour framework has been formulated in close relation with general sociological shifts in work and organization studies. Modern studies affirm that organizations, especially in the service and public sectors, are not just interested in what workers do but who they are and how they represent themselves. Building on this understanding, Schinoff et al. (2024) have reviewed studies in management and organization on what they call organizational body work, which is deliberate, institutionally-based efforts to influence human bodies in terms of materiality, meaning and functionality. Their analysis of more than two hundred studies reveals that there are five major themes: the causes, shapes, effects, and settings of such body work, and the differences in targeting of bodies. This theoretical framework can directly be applied in homogenized institutional settings including policing where body-shaping is formalised through recruiting guidelines, dress-codes and physical fitness.

Aesthetic Labour vs. Emotional Labour: Differences and Intersections

Aesthetic labour as being related to emotional labour has been highly refined in recent scholarship. According to Wood (2024), the categorical distinction between the two modes of labour is becoming less and less viable, especially when the institutionally co-produced aspects of bodily self-management and affective self-regulation are at stake. The analysis is based on the classic dichotomy between surface acting and deep acting, developed by Hochschild (1983), but showing that in reality workers move between the two registers concomitantly. The discussion of masculinity and embodiment at work by Giazitzoglu (2025) also reveals that the body serves as a resource that workers can use to enact identity, occupational status, and institutional belonging; the aesthetic and the affective aspects of the body support each other. These theoretical advances suggest that studying aesthetic labour within an institutional setting has to take into consideration the complicated interplay between the appearance and the emotions of the workers.

Disadvantages and Problems of the Aesthetic Labour Framework

Critical criticism has been given to the aesthetic labour scheme in terms of its limitations as an analytic scheme. It has been observed by scholars that the initial formulations were skewed

towards feminized work in the private sector and the United Kingdom, and that this restricts the cross-sectoral and cross-cultural applicability of the framework. In an experimental research on the topic of colorism and service providers in India, Ghoshal and Gill (2025) indicate that aesthetic judgements in institutional settings are much more complicated than hegemonic beauty standards would indicate, where darker skin color is correlated with perceived competence in some job realms, which makes straightforward explanations of aesthetic discrimination more difficult. Likewise, Sissoko et al. (2024) record that colorist microaggressions between South Asian and Brown Asian communities have very different mechanisms of action than the consumer-based aesthetic hierarchies that are observed in the literature on the private service sector.

Aesthetic Demands, Patriarchy and Gender in an Institutional Environment

Gender and aesthetic labour is one of the most productive areas of research in terms of its theoretical potential. Institutional female professionals must meet conflicting aesthetic requirements, appearing both to be professionally authoritative, and at the same time to meet feminized standards of modesty and beauty. In a study of Pakistani female police officers, which was presented in the context of the Social Identity Theory, Malik et al. (2025) discovered that gender stereotypes, identity negotiation pressures, and some structural constraints based on the patriarchal cultural norms combined to produce certain types of occupational strain among women in uniform. Female officers were discovered to over-compensate performatively, working more to be recognized as competent, in a society where their presence in a masculinised institution was still challenged.

Colorism, Stratification, and Overlapping Social Hierarchies

The labour of aesthetics works by the overlapping hierarchies of gender, class and colorism that are particularly acute in South Asian institutional settings. Microaggression Theory, as shown by Sissoko et al. (2024), makes it clear how colorism among South Asian peoples results in certain types of workplace disadvantage, specific to both anti-Black colorism and racial discrimination in general, and necessitates theorization that is sensitive to the colonial histories that instantiate hierarchies of skin-tone in both social and institutional cultures. Colorist expectations of the Pakistani institutional setting intersect with aesthetic labour demands in order to produce compounded disadvantage to officers whose corporeal forms fail to meet hegemonic aesthetic norms. Ghoshal and Gill (2025) adds to this image, revealing what they describe as a dark is hardworking association of Indian service situations, suggesting that Indian-based aesthetic hierarchies may be functioning in a way that cannot be reduced to mere skin-tone privilege.

Aesthetic Labour, Patronage Networks and Sifarish

Aesthetic compliance in relation to access to informal patronage networks in Pakistani organizations has been given a new academic consideration. The idea of sifarish — culturally ingrained practices of recommendation and advancement by using personal networks — continues to be key in comprehending career mobility in Pakistani institutional settings. In a case study of Pakistani policewomen of lower rank, Ahmad (2022) records the reproduction of structural injustices in policing by the use of coping mechanisms which police women use to respond to the gendered and aesthetic demands of the workplace, which proves that the exclusion of informal networks is not accidental, but a structural effect. A further report on female professionals in the criminal justice system in Pakistan (Academia International Journal, 2025) also confirms that gender-based obstacles to progress, such as aesthetic and presentational norms, engage with patronage relationships to generate cumulative disadvantage to female officers.

History of Pakistan Police

The organizational context within which aesthetic labour demands are mediated is subject to historical and institutional legacy of Pakistani policing. The Global Gender Gap Index 2024, a publication of the World Economic Forum, ranked Pakistan 145 out of 146 countries, highlighting the entrenched gender inequality that is rife in the institutional life of the country (World Economic Forum, 2024). The percentage of women in the total police force in Pakistan is less than three per cent — a much lower ratio than other comparable South Asian nations — which has been associated with underreporting of violence against women, organizational cultures that perpetuate hierarchies in patriarchy, and structural obstacles to female progress in uniformed service (Asian Lite Report, 2026). In a 2024 submission to the UN Human Rights Committee, the National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan said that patriarchal norms, rooted deeply in Pakistani institutions, such as the judiciary and the police, have continued to discriminate against women via various formal and informal mechanisms (NCHR, 2024).

Aesthetic Work in the State and in the Global South

The analysis of aesthetic labour with reference to the public-sector and state institutions in the Global South has not been fully developed. According to Schinoff et al. (2024), the body work scholarship of organizations has concentrated heavily on contexts in the private sector and market-oriented orientation, with the unique logic of aesthetic performance in state institutions — where the audience is superiors, colleagues, and the general public instead of consumers in a commercial context — being under-theorised. In a study of female police officers in Pakistan, Malik et al. (2025) claim that institutional hierarchies and state legitimacy mediate the logic of aesthetic performance in policing in a manner that necessitates a conceptually extended form of the aesthetic labour framework. The Pakistan Journal of Law, Analysis and Wisdom (2025) has also highlighted that GBV and gender-based institutional discrimination in Pakistan need multidimensional analytical approaches that incorporate focus on legal frameworks, organizational culture and day-to-day social practice — a methodological inclination that can be directly applied to the aesthetics of labour in uniformed contexts of the public sector.

Summary and Research Gaps

The literature on the contemporary study of aesthetic labour provides a theoretically deep yet geographically and sectorally narrow description of the mobilization of embodied capabilities in organizations. The latest scholarship — such as Wood (2024) on the interrelation of aesthetic and affective labour, Schinoff et al. (2024) on organizational body work, Giazitzoglu (2025) on masculinity and embodiment, and Braun and Clarke (2024) on reflexive methodological quality — offers newer conceptual and methodological tools to apply this literature to new contexts. The empirical research carried out by Pakistani scholars such as Malik et al. (2025) on female officers, Ahmad (2022) on gendered workplace inequality, and NCHR (2024) on institutional patriarchy provides the empirical foundation. As a contribution to the aesthetic labour literature, this paper seeks to put into practice and challenge the framework in a non-western uniformed and governmental organisation setting, focusing on the gendered, hierarchical, colorist, and culturally specific aspects of aesthetic demand that constitute policing in Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

Methodology

Research Design and Epistemological Orientation

The study incorporates an interpretivist epistemological context and an understanding of social realities that include a range of aesthetics. These include the self-regulating standards and expectations of institutions and embodied social realities. These social constructions are

the result of the interplay between culture, history, and social structures (Braun & Clarke, 2024). A qualitative research design was chosen as it aligned methodologically with the study's objective of generating contextually based accounts of police officers' experiences, as well as the way in which officers in the two cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi negotiate the requests of aesthetic labor and the impact these requests have on them. The qualitative methods compliment the study of the perception of identity and the body, in that they enable the researcher to capture the nuances of a phenomenon through the lens of the participants. This focus on the subjective nature of phenomena is aligned with the interpretivist framework of organizational and sociological research, in which the researcher recognizes their role as a co-creator of knowledge within the research context (Braun & Clarke, 2024).

Aesthetic Labour: Sites and Participants Details

This study surveyed Islamabad Capital Territory (ICT) Police Headquarters and stations, and the Rawalpindi Police Headquarters and stations. These sites are adjacent, and as such, have a combined relevance to the national police structure. These sites serve the primary population centers of the twin cities of Islamabad and Rawalpindi. These sites represent a visible and multi-layered police environment that combines both front line and administrative policing. Thus, these sites are good for seeing aesthetic labour at work. Participants were recruited using a purposive sampling technique from four category groups: female officers (constable to sub-inspector), male officers (constable to sub-inspector), senior and supervisory officers (above inspector), and administrative staff. A total of 50 participants (25 female officers, 25 male officers, 10 senior officers, and 5 administrative staff) were recruited through formal gatekeeper access facilitated by Human Resources within the police department.

Data Collection Instruments

The study employed three instruments: semi-structured interview guides (one each for female officers, male officers, senior supervisory officers, and administrative staff), focus group discussion (FGD) protocol, and an institutional observation checklist. The instruments were all designed in reference to aesthetic labor (Warhurst & Nickson, 2001; Wood, 2024; Schinoff et al., 2024; Giazitzoglu, 2025), colorism (Sissoko et al., 2024; Ghoshal & Gill, 2025), gender and Pakistani policing (Malik et al., 2025; Ahmad, 2022), and reflexive qualitative methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2024). The instruments were administered in English and Urdu; the Urdu versions were reviewed and back-translated by a bilingual research assistant. The instruments were then piloted on a sample similar to the target population. Based on the feedback, a few changes were incorporated. The final versions of the instruments were administered in the main study. The semi-structured interviews were held in a private setting within the police station or headquarters, with the respondents choosing either English or Urdu. The interviews were held for 48 to 61 minutes for officer-level respondents and 44 to 50 for senior respondents. These durations were within the limits of the test runs. One focus group discussion (FGD) was held with five female officers, following gender-separated protocols to provide adequate disclosure on touchy subjects, such as embedded appearance and skin tone, as well as institutional exclusion. All interviews and the FGD were audio recorded after assured explicit informed consent, supplemented with observation notes in a prepared field log.

Analytical Approach: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

For this study, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was conducted as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2024). RTA was chosen for the flexibility of the method as well as for the focus on reflexivity throughout the analysis. Six phases laid the foundation for the approach to the analysis: getting to know the data by reading the transcripts, generating codes, developing themes through the organization of codes, reviewing themes in relation to the coded data, and

finally, naming themes and producing the report. The principal researcher performed coding and kept a reflexive research journal to document the emerging themes and codes. Thematic saturation was assessed based on the observation of the data with a focus on the emergent themes and not based on a predetermined number. Five major themes were identified, each with multiple subthemes, which together describe the study's major findings.

Ethical Considerations

Before any interactions took place with participants, ethical approval was granted by the applicable Institutional Review Board. All participants offered written informed consent, and verbal assent was also obtained from FGD participants. Further, participants were told of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions, and informed that data collected would be kept private. For reporting purposes, all identifying information was anonymized, and quotations were quoted based on participant categories (e.g., Female Officer, Islamabad; Senior Officer, Rawalpindi). All recordings and transcripts are kept on an encrypted and password protected institutional server that is accessible to the research team only. Considering the sensitivity of the research topics (i.e., colorism, sifarish and gender based discrimination in a state institution), great care was taken to ensure participant anonymity and to control potential risks that the research may pose to participants.

Table 1: *Participant Demographic Profile*

Category	Gender	Rank/Role	Years of Service	n
Group 1	Female	Constable – Sub-Inspector	2–15	15
Group 2	Male	Constable – Sub-Inspector	3–18	15
Group 3	Mixed	DSP / Inspector (Senior)	10–25	10
Group 4	Mixed	Administrative Staff	5–20	5
FGD	Female	Female Officers	3–12	5
Total				50

Note. FGD = Focus Group Discussion. All participants were drawn from Islamabad Capital Territory Police and Rawalpindi Police.

Results

Reflexive thematic analysis of 45 semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion (n = 50) generated five overarching themes and ten sub-themes, presented in Table 2 below with representative quotations and thematic frequencies. Each theme is subsequently interpreted in the light of the study's theoretical framework and research questions. Where participants are cited, attribution reflects participant category and site only, in accordance with the study's anonymisation protocol.

Table 2: *Thematic Analysis Results: Core Themes, Sub-Themes, Representative Quotations, and Frequencies*

Theme	Sub-Theme	Representative Quote	Frequency (n=50)
Aesthetic Compliance Uniform Demands	Formal dress & regulation	"My dupatta must always be pinned correctly — seniors check this daily." (Female Officer, SHO Office, Islamabad)	38 (76%)

	Gendered grooming norms	"There are no written rules about hair but everyone knows what is expected." (Female Officer, Rawalpindi)	29 (58%)
Colorism & Skin Tone Bias	Front-facing role assignment	"Officers with fair skin are put at reception or press briefings more often." (Male Officer, Islamabad)	31 (62%)
	Informal aesthetic hierarchy	"Darker-complexioned officers are told they are better for fieldwork — as if that is a compliment." (Female Officer, Rawalpindi)	21 (42%)
Sifarish Patronage Networks	& Appearance facilitating access	"If you look presentable and confident, seniors notice you for recommendations." (Senior Officer, Islamabad)	35 (70%)
	Exclusion from informal networks	"I am never invited to informal gatherings where connections are made. I think it is partly how I look." (Female Officer)	23 (46%)
Gender Identity & Institutional Belonging	Double-bind pressure	"I have to look feminine enough not to threaten anyone, but strong enough to be taken seriously." (Female Officer, SHO)	27 (54%)
	Masculine embodiment norms	"Physical fitness and commanding presence — that is what makes you look like a real officer." (Male Officer)	20 (40%)
Emotional Psychological Impact	& Aesthetic labour fatigue	"By the end of the shift I am exhausted not from the work but from keeping myself together." (Female Officer)	33 (66%)
	Dissonance and identity strain	"There is a version of me at work and a version at home. They do not always match." (Female Officer, Rawalpindi)	19 (38%)

Note. Frequencies reflect the number of participants (out of $n = 50$) who referenced each sub-theme across interview and FGD data. Percentages in parentheses.

Theme 1: Aesthetic Compliance and Uniform Demands

Across all participant categories, formal and informal aesthetic compliance dominated secondary themes. Seventy-six percent of participants ($n = 38$) indicated demanding compliance with uniforms, while 58% ($n = 29$) outlined gendered grooming standards with distinct enforcement of aesthetic compliance. Formal inspection (and precise wearing of dupatta among women, press maintenance of uniforms, and shoes) was conducted by supervisors as participants described as a quasi-ceremonial routine. Informally, participants also described a routine of ceremonial inspections, in particular, female officers. Female officers described unwritten standards of carrying out body work and standards of styling hair,



as well as the form of make-up applied. In the context of informal expectations and multiple layers of enforcement within the structure and routine of policing, aesthetic compliance should also be viewed as a mechanism of operational regulation. The policing of the aesthetics of officers, in addition to the operational requirements of regulations, may be viewed as a mechanism of identity formation of the institution. This is consistent with Schinoff et al.'s (2024) framework of discipline and organizational body work.

Theme 2: Colorism and Skin Tone Hierarchies

Colorism emerged as a structurally significant dimension of aesthetic labour in both sites. Table 3 presents participant responses to structured thematic prompts addressing the perceived impact of skin tone on postings, evaluation, and informal institutional culture.

Table 3: *Participant Perceptions of Colorism in Posting, Evaluation, and Sifarish Access (n = 50)*

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral / Disagree	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
Skin tone influences posting to front-facing roles	17 (34%)	14 (28%)	9 (18%)	10 (20%)
Fair-complexioned officers receive more supervisory praise	15 (30%)	16 (32%)	10 (20%)	9 (18%)
Colorist comments are made informally among colleagues	21 (42%)	13 (26%)	8 (16%)	8 (16%)
Skin tone affects opportunities for sifarish recommendations	18 (36%)	12 (24%)	11 (22%)	9 (18%)

Note. Figures represent participant counts and percentages. Categories were derived inductively from thematic interview data and verified through member-checking.

Thirty-one participants (62%) indicated that skin color affected assignment to roles that required facing the public. Lighter-skinned officers were more often assigned to the reception, press, and VIP escort roles. Twenty-one participants (42%) indicated that colorist comments were made informally among the staff. This confirmed microaggression dynamics in the Sissoko et al. (2024) study in similar South Asian institutional contexts. Some senior male officers who were in the minority challenged colorist preferences. In some cases, having a darker skin tone may have indicated toughness and fitness to carry out fieldwork. Ghoshal and Gill's (2025) association of dark skin and hard work supports this, but the traditionally greater body of the current study supports that lighter-skinned officers were allocated to the more visible roles in the institution.

Theme 3: Sifarish, Patronage Networks, and Aesthetic Labour

The intersection of aesthetic compliance with informal sifarish patronage networks was the most structurally significant theme identified in relation to career mobility and institutional belonging. Table 4 presents the frequency with which participants in each gender group referenced five key sub-themes at the nexus of aesthetic labour and sifarish.

Table 4: *Aesthetic Labour and Sifarish Networks: Thematic Frequency by Gender (n = 50)*

Theme	Female (n=25)	Male (n=25)	Interpretation
Appearance aids sifarish access	20 (80%)	10 (40%)	Female officers report disproportionately higher pressure to use presentation as a networking tool
Grooming improves senior relations	17 (68%)	11 (44%)	Grooming compliance perceived as relational capital, particularly for female officers
Aesthetic conformity speeds promotion	15 (60%)	9 (36%)	Female officers link aesthetic compliance to promotion more strongly than male peers
Informal networks prioritised over merit	22 (88%)	14 (56%)	Sifarish operates across gender but more strongly disadvantages female officers excluded from informal spaces
Appearance mandated in front-facing roles	18 (72%)	16 (64%)	Near-universal consensus that aesthetic criteria apply to public-facing assignments across gender

Note. Frequencies reflect the number of participants in each gender group who referenced each theme in interview data. Percentages indicate proportion within gender group.

The data document a pronounced gendered gap regarding the role of sifarish in aesthetic labour. Of the 25 female officers surveyed, 22 (88%) reported that informal networks took precedence over merit, as compared with 14 (56%) of the 25 male officers surveyed. Significantly more female officers reported that facial grooming, deportment, and personal style, among other things, functioned as a currency of social capital, which, within a sifarish context, provided patronage, and when a sifarish patronage was not met, social exclusion. The imbalance of gendered relations of aesthetic power and labour is aligned with Ahmad's (2022) observation of the female officers surveyed, regarding the gendered relations of aesthetics and labour, who, in the context of a racialised organisational space, have no choice but to perpetrate their own marginalization.

Theme 4: Gender Identity and Institutional Belonging

Fifty-four percent of participants (n = 27), most of whom were women, described a dual expectation of being both Groomed, modest and feminine, and presenting as credible and physically dominant law enforcement officers. This resulted in what a number of participants referred to as, 'performative overload.' Not being able to satisfy the demands of the organization, female participants described a state of self-surveillance. Male participants described different and less complex aesthetic demands. Feminine and policing identities were described as reinforcing and symbiotic. Giazitzoglu's (2025) analysis of masculine embodiment in institutions explains this difference and is an example of policing and feminine identities being described as symbiotic. Male officers were able to mainly embody the institution without managing its conflicts; female officers were not.

Theme 5: Emotional and Psychological Impact

Interview data captured the emotional impact of aesthetic labour and compliance. 66% of participants (n = 33) documented aesthetic labour fatigue, the persistent attempt to manage

one's appearance and presentation at work. 38% (n = 19) documented identity dissonance, where the presentation required by an institution clashes with a person's self-concept. These findings relate to Wood (2024) and say that aesthetic labour gets the worker to pay the price of affect, but institutional self-presentation does not have a commercial motivation. Aesthetic and emotional labour becomes intertwined when the worker must manage the correct body for work, which is both emotional and physical labour. This aligns with Wood (2024) and helps clarify the convergence of aesthetic and emotional labour.

Discussion

Extending Aesthetic Labour Theory to State and Non-Western Institutional Contexts

The results of this research offer significant empirical evidence for a contextually expanded understanding of aesthetic labor beyond the private sector, western, and feminized service work within which the original model was developed. The five themes — aesthetic compliance, colorism, the navigation of sifarish, gender identity and belonging, and the emotional consequences — collectively illustrate that in the context of the policing system in Pakistan, aesthetic labor is a system of embodied regulation that is structurally and systemically embedded and institutionally reproduced. This confirms and builds on Schinoff et al.'s (2024) argument about the ubiquity of organizational body work, and places a critique on the implicit belief that aesthetic labor is predominantly a commercial endeavor that is driven by consumer-facing logics. There is a need to re-specify the audience and purpose dimensions of the framework, as in the context of policing Pakistan, the audience for aesthetic work are not consumers, but rather superiors in the bureaucracy, peers, and the state. The structuring logic of aesthetic work in this context is not commercial, but rather disciplinary, hierarchical, and identity work, which is in line with Foucauldian perspectives of the regulation of bodies within the institution.

Colorism as a Structurally Distinct Dimension of Aesthetic Labour

The inclusion of colorism by participants is one of the study's most significant theoretical contributions. Regarding South Asian and Brown Asian communities, Sissoko et al. (2024) describe colorism as something that employs a specific micro-aggressive logic and cannot be incorporated into broader descriptions of appearance discrimination. In this study, colorist hierarchies establish the requirements for aesthetic labour by deciding which officers are assigned to roles of being visible, front-facing, and in public contact, and therefore which officers are subjected to scrutiny and regulation of their appearance to the greatest extent. This provides a more generalized account than Ghoshal and Gill (2025) offer in relation to the association of dark skin with hard work, by showing that, in Pakistani policing, the link between skin tone and assessment of appearance may work to the advantage of lighter skin in certain visible roles, and the association of dark skin with fieldwork may offer a limited, if not incomplete, form of recognition to dark-skinned officers in operational settings. The role of colorism in aesthetic labor and policing deserves to be examined as a separate framework, and should not be incorporated as a sub-dimension of appearance discrimination.

Sifarish, Patronage, and the Compounded Disadvantage of Female Officers

The relationship between aesthetic compliance and sifarish networks is the most significant finding in this study. The data show that aesthetic labour within Pakistani policing is more complex than just satisfying regulatory requirements or creating a commercial persona. It is a form of relational capital that helps access the informal patronage networks through which career opportunities, sought-after posts, and institutional rewards are offered. Female officers perceived this intersection as compounded disadvantage. They were subject to more intensive aesthetic compliance, were more visibly policed, and were more closely linked to sifarish

networks than their male counterparts. This compounding structure substantiates Ahmad's (2022) description of the structural reproduction of inequality through mechanisms that are adaptive and self-marginalising, and offers further insights through the lens of aesthetic performance and patronage networks. The theory of cumulative disadvantage, which is developed by the Academia International Journal (2025) in relation to female criminal justice professionals, is also relevant here, and provides a valuable theoretical perspective for exploring this intersection further.

The Double-Bind and Institutional Identity Strain

The double-bind of gendered aesthetic labor in institutional contexts is further illustrated by Malik et al. (2025) on female Pakistani police officers within a Social Identity Theory framework. Their findings are extended by this study's results which show that double-binds stem from both identity and aesthetics. With Pakistani police female officers, contradictory demands from institutions are inscribed on the body and managed through sustained performative effort. The aesthetic demands of policing and femininity are contradictory and the management of this contradiction results in the performative overload that the police female officers narrate. The presence of structural contradictions in the aesthetic demand of policing in Pakistan makes various institutional wellbeing approaches of policing ineffective.

Methodological Contribution: Reflexive Thematic Analysis in Uniformed Institutional Settings

The study's integration of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024) in a uniformed, state, and non-Western institutional context highlights the fit of this analytic framework in sensitive institutional research. In this instance, reflexivity concerning the researcher's positionality was imperative due to the intersection of power relations, the setting of gender asymmetries, and complex participant disclosure. The research team addressed the role of institutional access, the dynamics of gender in the context of the interviews, the research team members' positions, and their relationship with the data, through an ongoing reflexive memo. Subsequent qualitative studies on aesthetic labor in similar contexts should adopt comparably elaborate reflexive protocols to ensure analytical integrity as well as address the ethical challenges of conducting research in oppressive, hierarchically structured, and gendered institutions.

Implications and Recommendations

This study gives several practical suggestions for the police administration in Pakistan and other comparable services. First, the formal codification and clear communication on the aesthetics and grooming standards, which are shaped through a lens of operational necessity and not through culturally arbitrary appearance norms, will significantly decrease the scope for informal, discriminatory enforcement. Second, the recognition of aesthetic labor as a real and visible labor cost and not an expectation that is invisible or naturalized will create aesthetic labor fatigue, which is a notable occupational stressor. Third, institutional anti-colorism training and monitoring systems will tackle the colorist hierarchies in posting and evaluation, which are empirically documented but institutionally ignored. Fourth, informal mentorship and career advancement systems will decrease the compounded disadvantage faced by female officers, whose access to informal mentorship is determined through an arbitrarily aesthetic lens. These suggestions uphold the proposed policy developments by NCHR (2024) and the broader human rights framework for gender equality in Pakistan, as articulated in the Pakistan Journal of Law, Analysis, and Wisdom (2025).

Conclusion

The study examined aesthetic labour functions in two of the most significant police departments in Pakistan, the Islamabad Capital Territory Police and Rawalpindi Police, using a qualitative research design based on interpretivist epistemology and analysed via reflexive thematic analysis. Findings indicate that the aesthetic labour in Pakistani policing is institutionally embedded, gendered, colorist and structurally connected to informal networks of patronage called 'sifarish', through which career progression and formal acknowledgment by the institution are obtained. Five main themes emerged: (1) aesthetic compliance and requirements of uniformity (2) colorism and skin tone classification (3) navigation of sifarish and patronage networks, (4) gender identity and connection to institution and (5) emotional and psychological effects. The research offers a description of the operation of aesthetic labour in a non-Western, state, and uniformed institutional system.

The study puts forward three main theoretical claims in the aesthetic labour discourse. First, the study empirically demonstrates that the aesthetic labour frameworks which are primarily based in a Western context of the private sector, demonstrate the need for contextual adaptation to consider the logics of a state and uniformed institutional system that are disciplinary and hierarchical in nature. Second, the study grounds colorism as a structural, self-contained, and autonomous dimension of aesthetic labour in a South Asian context, advancing the microaggression-based analysis of Sissoko et al. (2024) and the context-laden findings of Ghoshal and Gill (2025) within the realm of institutional policing. It shows the exact method of how aesthetic compliance and informal patronage combine to create multiple disadvantages for female officers — an insight that complements Ahmad's (2022) explanation of the reproduction of structural inequalities within the Pakistani police, and further extends the literature on the cumulative disadvantages of women in the Pakistani criminal justice system.

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